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ABSTRACT

To address the shortage of special education teachers, California State University (CSU), Chico in collaboration with rural, isolated school districts in CSU's service area, designed a two-year, on-the-job training program that recruited, prepared, and supported new special education teachers. Candidates, selected collaboratively by the University and the school district, were recruited from among regular class teachers, teacher education students, re-entry educators, and current part-time substitute teachers. The 20 selected candidates received a modest stipend to defray the costs of commuting, fees, and texts. Training was available at regional sites via interactive instructional television and in an intensive campus summer session. A support system was developed by the district and University staff members to increase communication and provide supervision for the interns who were located in isolated, rural areas. In addition, each candidate was assigned a fully credentialed special education teacher to offer peer support. A survey comparing interns with students in the regular special education program at the University indicates that interns had many years of teaching experience and a strong support structure as a major incentive for involvement. The students in the regular, non-intern program believe a support system would be beneficial in their training. A longitudinal study is in progress to follow both interns and regular students to assess effectiveness and differences of programs. (LP)

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RECRUITING AND SUPPORTING SPECIAL EDUCATION TRAINEES FOR RURAL, ISOLATED COMMUNITIES

At last count, the nation lacked 30,000 special education teachers while universities reported a nearly thirty percent decrease in the number of special education degrees granted between 1984 and 1988 (National Association of State Directors of Special Education [NASDSE], 1990). New special education teachers appeared to leave the profession at an even higher rate than did general education teachers; that is, even more than fifty percent left in the first five years of teaching (NASDSE, 1990). The crisis varies in relation to geographical regions, with urban and rural, especially isolated rural areas, reporting the greatest needs. The following project is designed to address the dual need in special education: to find and to keep the best of teachers.

RURAL SETTING

California State University, Chico (CSU, Chico) is the sole institution offering specialist teacher education within a 33,000 square mile region of northeastern California. This region includes twelve rural counties. Distances from the small schools to the campus often exceed 100 miles (one-way). For approximately four months of the year, inclement weather precludes the possibility for many of commuting to campus. Isolated from other areas and from the University itself, these rural schools face increasing numbers of students with disabilities and yet persistent shortages of qualified special education personnel.

The University, in collaboration with school districts in its service area, has designed a training program that recruits, prepares and supports new special education teachers. By significantly reducing this personnel shortage and by strengthening existing district efforts, the program improves the quality of education received by exceptional students in its service area.

COLLABORATION IN RECRUITMENT

This two-year, on-the-job training program begins with the recruitment of qualified candidates as special educators in their home communities. Local school administrators and University personnel offer informational meetings, brochures and newsletters designed to attract academically and professionally talented individuals to the special education profession. Recruitment materials emphasize that the program seeks "the best," specifying an above-average academic and professional record as prerequisites.

Preference is given to current residents of the region since these individuals are most likely to remain in their area and teaching position. Candidates are recruited from four subgroups:

- (1) Talented regular class teachers who desire to improve their skills in teaching special populations;

- (2) Students in the final phase of their basic elementary or secondary teaching credential program who have excelled within that training program and who demonstrate particular competence in teaching mainstreamed exceptional children;
- (3) Re-entry educators who seek updated training prior to assuming teaching positions;
- (4) Current part-time substitute teachers who plan to assume full-time teaching positions and who, in substitute assignments, demonstrate unusual potential for successfully teaching exceptional students.

Selection of trainees is also collaborative: both the district and the University must agree on candidates. Recruits from category (1), regular class teachers, are ordinarily preferred in the selection process since they bring valuable experience to the specialist's emerging role as consultant.

STRUCTURED, ACCESSIBLE TRAINING

Partially funded by a U.S. Department of Education personnel training grant for special educators, the project offers structured, accessible training to these residents of rural and isolated communities. Twenty candidates receive a modest stipend intended to defray the expenses of commuting, fees and texts. Training is available at regional sites, through interactive instructional television, and in an intensive campus summer session. Employing school districts offer trainees ten days of release time in order to attend monthly follow-up sessions. Early training emphasizes teaching strategies needed to address pupil differences in learning.

A three-day preservice (or "Boot Camp") orients interns to their new roles and responsibilities prior to the first school year. This experience also serves to form the social support that will strengthen trainees during the school year ahead. By increasing communication between their rural, isolated settings, trainees learn early the benefit of a supportive professional cadre.

SUPPORT SYSTEMS

In addition to formal training, a "safety net" or support network is built around each trainee. District and university staffs cooperate to provide joint supervision throughout the two-year period, culminating in the joint recommendation for credentialing. In addition, a local, fully credentialed special education teacher is selected to offer peer support to each trainee. These peer coaches receive University-sponsored training in supportive communications, teaching effectiveness, coaching and video analysis. It is expected that a side benefit of the program will be increased job satisfaction and retention on the part of both trainees and mentor teachers.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

The CSU, Chico Special Education Intern Program provides two years of on-the-job training leading to certification to teach in California Special Education classrooms. Additionally, CSU, Chico offers a regular credential program in Special Education that students can take at their own pace, but typically complete in five years. In the past, school districts have hired teachers on emergency credentials and special waivers from the State Department of Education to fill the shortage of special education teachers in the Northstate. One of the requirements of the emergency credential and special waiver is that the recipients enroll in coursework at the University. In November, 1990, a

survey was administered to 18 of this year's interns and 13 students from the regular special education teaching program (referred to here as the control group) to determine if there are differences in the populations served through each of these routes.

Backgrounds

On an average, the 18 interns have five years of experience in regular education classrooms (range = 0 to 20), while the control group teachers have three and one-half years of experience in regular education classrooms (range = 0 to 12). Interns are about 10 years older than the control group with an average age of 42.

Reasons for entering the profession

In depicting their reasons for choosing to become special education teachers, respondents were presented with a list of possible reasons and asked to check all of the reasons that were applicable to their individual decisions. A summary of their responses are shown below.

Interns	Decision Factors	Control Group
94%	Opportunity to help young people w/disabilities	77%
89%	Personally satisfying job	92%
83%	Opportunity to see growth in individual students	85%
72%	Like to make a difference in children's lives	85%
56%	Like to learn new things	62%
39%	Impressed with special ed teachers at my school	31%
28%	Wanted to stay in the area	38%
28%	Have a learning disabled child & became interested	0%
28%	Needed a new challenge	31%
28%	Small class size was an attraction	23%
22%	Opportunity to work in a consulting role	46%
22%	Needed a change	15%
22%	Convenient schedule for being a parent	31%
22%	Jobs not available in regular education	23%
17%	Comparatively good salary	31%
17%	Saw special education as a career ladder	15%
11%	Tuition stipend offered made it attractive	N/A
5%	Summers off	23%
5%	Sibling is learning disabled	.08%
0%	At least one parent was a special education teacher	.08%

The greatest differences between the two groups appear in the following categories. 28% of the Interns reported having a learning disabled child and stated that this experience served as important motivator for them in pursuing a career in special education while none of the control group was so affected (28% difference). 22% of the Interns cited their desire to work in a consulting capacity as a decision motivator while 46% (24% difference) of the control group cited the opportunity to work in a consulting capacity as significant in arriving at their career decisions. 94% of the Interns reported that the opportunity to help young people with disabilities was a significant factor in their career decision. 77% (17% difference) of the control group considered the opportunity to help young people with disabilities in their career choice. 5% of the Interns reported valuing summer vacation periods sufficiently to influence their career choices, while this was so for 23% of the control group (17% difference). Salary considerations were less frequently mentioned by Interns (17%) than by control group students (31%) as an important motivator in their choice of a special education career (14% difference). While the opportunity to make a difference in children's lives was an important factor

or both groups, it was less significant to Interns (72%) than to control group students (92%). This factor has been found to be a major motivator for all teachers regardless of specialization. Finally the desire to remain within the geographic area was a less important motivator for those in the Intern Program (28%) than to on-campus students (38%--10% difference).

Intern Program Incentives

Interns were asked how much the stipend, release time, the opportunity to work on a Masters Degree, and the support to be provided in the internship program, were incentives for entering the special education profession. They were also asked to indicate if there were other incentives for entering the internship program, and how much of an incentive this was to them. Thirteen out of the fifteen specifying an incentive indicated that they have always wanted to work with this special population, however, the opportunities were limited because of geography and scheduling. The results, shown below, indicate that the strongest incentive for the interns to enter the field of special education is their desire to work with the special education population, followed by the support provided in the program, the opportunity to work on a masters, the release time provided, and lastly, the stipend.

	Not at all							A Great Deal	
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	AVE
Stipend	5		1	1	4	2	4	1	3.4
Release Time	4		1	3	2	3	1	4	3.8
Masters	3	1	1	1	4	2	2	4	4.0
Support		1	2		2	6	3	4	4.9
Other:			1		1	2	4	5	5.8
To work with the population									

Control Group Reflections

When asked what would facilitate their teaching in special education right now (November), almost every teacher in the control group responded that peer coaching, or some type of structured assistance, would be invaluable--someone with whom to communicate, to build the spirit of cooperation, and to avoid reinventing the wheel. Although none of the control teachers seemed to have a structured support system, 58% of them said they seek assistance 75% to 100% of the time when they need it.

Summary

Overall, the preliminary findings indicate that strong candidates with many years of experience have been recruited for the internship program. The strong support structure is one of the major incentives to being involved in the program, a component that students in the regular, non-intern program feel is sorely missing in their training program.

A longitudinal study is in process to follow these interns as well as candidates in the regular special education program to assess program effectiveness, and product differences.